

GROWTH CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM BALANCING THE OPTIONS

a citizens guide to land use
planning in Rhode Island



Rhode Island Department of Administration
Statewide Planning Program

University of Rhode Island
Feinstein College of Continuing Education

About the Study Guide...

This guide for all Rhode Island citizens is a joint effort sponsored by the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program and the Public Affairs Office of the University of Rhode Island's Feinstein College of Continuing Education. Activities of the program are supported by state appropriations and federal grants. The contents of this report reflect the views of the Statewide Planning Program which is responsible for the accuracy of facts and data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of other sponsoring agencies. This publication is based upon publicly supported research and may not be copyrighted. It may be reprinted, in part or full, with the customary crediting of the source.

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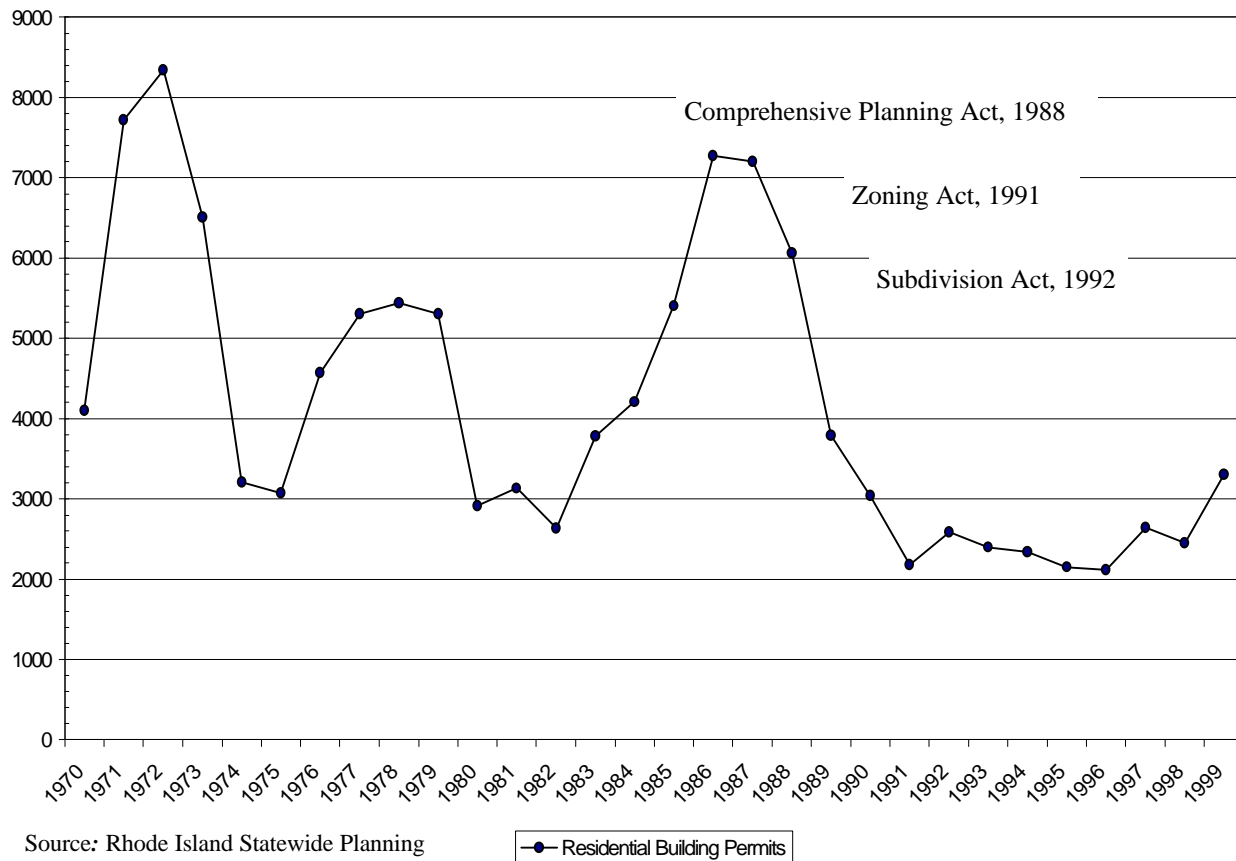
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Single Family and Multi- Family Building Permits Issued



“An unlikely coalition of disparate interests wrote and secured passage of three laws that completely restructured municipal planning and implementation. Commission members... created the legal basis and operational framework for effective management of growth in a densely developed urban and industrial state.”

~ Daniel Varin, Growth Management in Rhode Island- “A Lively Experiment,” Environmental and Urban Issues, Vol. 21, No. 1, Fall 1993

A New Planning Environment

At the height of the residential building boom of the late 1980s, landmark planning and zoning legislation completely changed the way growth and development is managed in Rhode Island.

The 1988 *Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act* and new state zoning and subdivision laws together gave Rhode Island cities and towns the necessary tools to guide land use, manage growth, and promote good design. These new laws respect the autonomy of local communities and recognize the importance of public participation in the planning process.

Today, the results of the new legislation and better planning by our local communities are becoming evident.

Balancing the Options

To Create a New Vision For the Future of Our State

The dynamic, evolving nature of society leads to dramatic changes in how we use our land. We are still dynamic. We are still evolving. That is why we need to plan now for what we want the next chapter of Rhode Island's changing landscape to look like.

The purpose of this citizen's guide is to involve citizens in thoughtful discussion about past, present, and future land use trends and policy.

Together, we will develop a shared vision for the next 20 years and the policies to support that vision in the new State Land Use Policies and Plan (the current plan, *Land Use 2010, State Land Use Policies and Plan*, was published in 1989).

Community partnership is essential to the process of planning the way we use our land. For this reason, the State of Rhode Island, through its Statewide Planning Program, encourages the citizens of the state to become more involved in planning for the future at the local, regional, or state level.

"We Rhode Islanders are creative, resilient, and public spirited . . . Now we can use our limited window of opportunity and fashion a new, enlightened approach to growth, one that strengthens our cities, protects our special places, and expands economic opportunity."

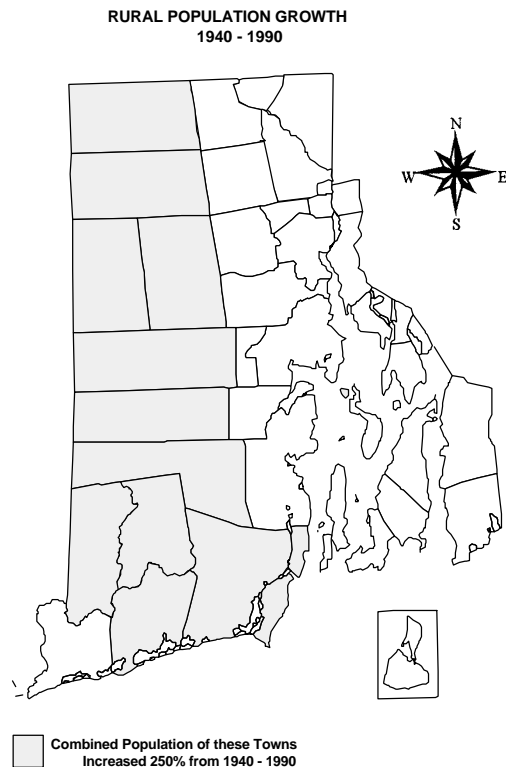
~ Grow Smart Rhode Island report, The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Decay in Rhode Island, February 2000.

DID YOU KNOW ?

- ◆ Today, 95% of land under local jurisdiction is zoned for development. This means that only 5% is currently protected from development by zoning.
- ◆ Residential acreage climbed from 89,000 acres to almost 140,000 acres between 1970 and 1995.
- ◆ Between 1940 and 1990, the combined populations of the shaded communities increased by 250%. Narragansett alone grew by 850%.
- ◆ During the same period, the population of Providence decreased by 92,776.

"Rhode Island can solve its suburban sprawl problem only if it solves its urban decay problem."

~Grow Smart Rhode Island report, The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Decay in Rhode Island



Our Changing Landscape

A Brief History

Rhode Island has experienced several distinct periods of development. During each period, one particular pattern of development dominated the landscape. From the clearing of the forests in the 1600s through the mid-1800s, Rhode Island's landscape was primarily farms and small villages. But the Industrial Revolution irreversibly changed the landscape. Rapidly expanding cities became the center of economic and family life.

In 1800, 80% of the population lived in rural areas; by 1850, 80% of the population lived in cities. By 1897, almost 300 Rhode Island farms had been abandoned, and cities and towns were in ascendancy. At the same time, the abandoned farm fields were regrowing into woodlands, resulting in the seemingly contradictory trend of Rhode Island becoming both more urban and more forested during the first half of the twentieth century.

In the 1930s, a new migration began, with movement away from the cities. Between 1940 and today, Rhode Island witnessed the birth and maturation of an entirely new lifestyle and entirely new landscape, the suburbs. But suburbs are not the final chapter.

Where are we going?

If current development patterns prevail, we can expect that:

- ◆ As more people migrate toward a lower-density environment, they will limit the remaining land development and land use choices. At the same time, continued urban decline will offer fewer choices to those who prefer city living.
- ◆ Urban centers will have larger numbers of low-income households. As property values decline, tax rates will increase.
- ◆ Irreplaceable natural resources will be consumed.
- ◆ Property taxes will escalate in suburban developments to cope with growing demands.

Some Land Use Trends

In July 1999, the Statewide Planning Program published "An Analysis of Rhode Island Land Use," which describes trends emerging between 1961 and 1988 and the impact of those trends during a time when population growth was minimal. The major trends identified include:

- ◆ Development increased faster than population.
- ◆ The largest source of development came from residential land use.
- ◆ Population migrated toward the rural parts of the state.
- ◆ Employment centers expanded away from central cities.
- ◆ Industrial land use increased and moved farther into the suburbs.
- ◆ The most visible source of development was commercial.
- ◆ The amount of land dedicated to transportation increased.
- ◆ Agricultural uses of land continued to decline.
- ◆ Protection of undeveloped land increased.

The state is increasingly urban. There is a qualitative difference between the traditional central cities, which were designed for high density living (with sidewalks, public transportation, etc.) and the newly urbanized suburbs, which were designed for low density but are becoming high density neighborhoods.

"Poorly planned development unnecessarily threatens our remaining open spaces, our water supplies, and the diversity of our biological resources."

~ Jan H. Reitsma, RIDEM Annual Report, 1998.

Discussing the Issues

Three themes underlie the current land use plan for the state—sustainability, capability, and livability.

Sustainability describes land use activities that meet the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

- ♦ *What choices should we make today so that we respect the options of tomorrow?*

Capability describes the capacity of the land to accommodate new land uses while considering their impacts on natural, cultural, and historic resources. Continued advances in technology have given us the ability to build wherever we want at affordable prices.

- ♦ *At what point does our desire to develop the land outpace the land's ability to accommodate development?*



"YUP, SOME STORM LAST NIGHT. THE PAPER SAYS THERE WAS WIDESPREAD EROSION."

Used with the permission of Don Bousquet

Livability involves our values and priorities as a society and as individuals. Livable places satisfy our social and economic needs with a landscape and neighborhoods that are comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. How do we balance the freedom of individuals to make their personal choices while still preserving quality of life?

- ♦ *At what point do our actions as individuals negatively affect the very qualities that first attracted us to an area?*

"Concern for the environment and access to parks and open space is not frivolous or peripheral; rather it is central to the welfare of people—body, mind, and spirit."

~ Laurance S. Rockefeller

Discussing the Issues



In a traditional city, businesses and residences are close together, lot sizes are relatively small, and multifamily housing is relatively abundant.

- ♦ Mass transit is widely available and sidewalks are everywhere.
- ♦ Public infrastructure such as water and sewers extend to almost all neighborhoods.
- ♦ Neighborhood character and boundaries are readily definable.

What makes a place livable is different for different people at different times in their lives.

In a typical suburb, housing and businesses are segregated, lot sizes are relatively large, and multifamily housing is relatively scarce.

- ♦ Automobiles dominate the transportation scene.
- ♦ While some infrastructure such as public water is fairly common, other infrastructure, such as sewers, is widely scattered.
- ♦ Suburban neighborhoods generally do not have a clear sense of identity and neighborhood boundaries are ill defined.



“The suburbs are not for everyone, but their appeal is not mysterious. We may watch with dismay when the open spaces beyond our property are consumed by bulldozers. But who can blame people for wanting what 138 million Americans already have?”

~ Philip Terzian, A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, The Providence Journal , December 8, 1999

Discussing the Issues

City and Suburb

City and suburb were each designed for very different purposes. One is not inherently better than the other. Suburbs were designed to allow people to “escape” the perceived drawbacks of urban life. People could spend their days working and shopping in central cities but could spend their leisure time and raise their children in suburban bedroom communities.

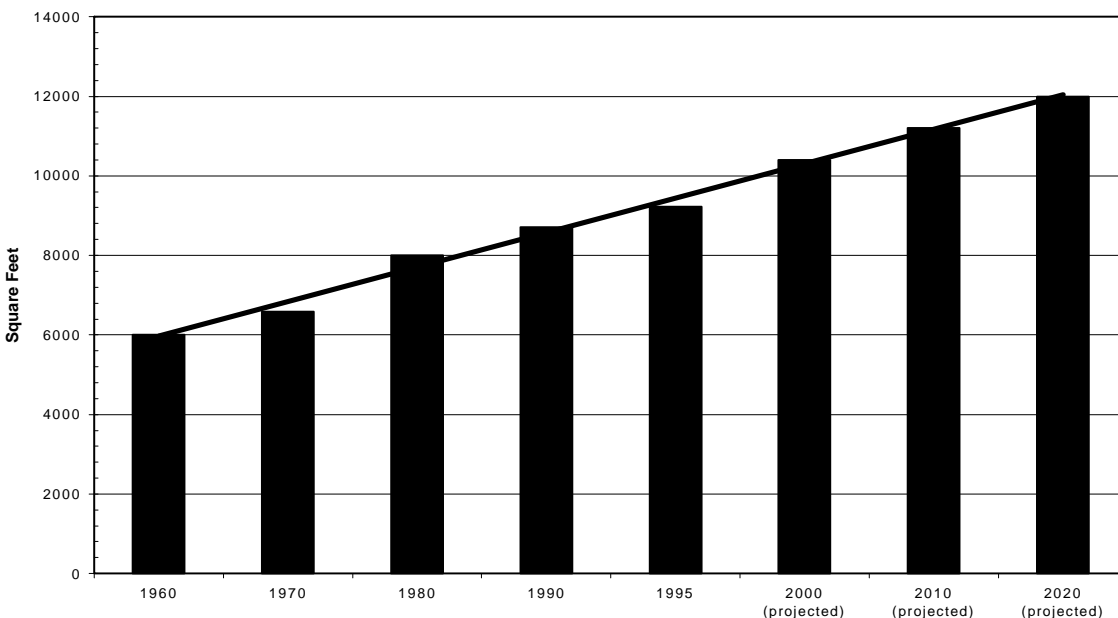
As people move to low-density rural communities, they begin to change the very characteristics that attracted them there in the first place. At some point, those characteristics are lost. In other words, unless populations can be kept level or new land added, low-density scattered development is not sustainable.

For example, some people moved to Arizona to find relief from the hay fever that plagued them in their home regions. Finding Arizona to be too desert-like, they planted lawns and trees. After a few years, they discovered that their hay fever had returned. To make matters worse, they had to spend inordinate amounts of money on fertilizer and irrigation to keep their lawns and trees healthy in the Arizona desert.

Similarly, people living in suburbs found that they missed the convenience of nearby shopping. Business enterprises filled this void by creating commercial strips along well-traveled highways. Furthermore, municipalities, in their efforts to increase the property tax base, encouraged ever more commercial and industrial development. In other words, urban land uses kept increasing, and thereby transforming, suburban communities into urban communities. Meanwhile the traditional urban communities faced declining populations, deteriorating housing, vacant lots, falling tax revenues, and vacant commercial and industrial buildings.

Developed Square Feet Per Person

Rhode Island 1960-2020
(Actual and Projected)



Discussing the Issues

Making Difficult Choices

Imagine for a moment that you are moving to a new house. You can afford to pay for only one moving van and you can't fit all your possessions into it. You'll need to plan carefully in order to take advantage of the available space. After you have filled the van to capacity, for every new item that you want to add, you will need to take one item off. Everything is valuable to you, but you can't afford to have it all.

Now instead of the moving van imagine a piece of land and the environment that goes with it. It can hold only a certain amount of what we want. When land development is increasing faster than population growth we can call it *sprawl*. It is not inherently bad. But it is filling up our imaginary moving van and we are leaving some of our valuable possessions behind, whether we know it or not.

What Are the Trade-Offs?

The most obvious thing we lose as we increase development is undeveloped land. That undeveloped land, whether it is woodlands, grasslands, or wetlands is habitat to everything from bugs to birds, from mushrooms to blueberries, and from turtles to flying squirrels.

We also lose clean water. Impermeable surfaces, such as roads and parking areas, keep water from soaking into the ground, which, in turn, increases the volume of water running into streams, rivers, ponds, and the Bay. This "stormwater runoff" carries with it oil, gasoline, and other assorted gunk.

We lose air quality. The EPA notes that, "Although car exhaust is cleaner than ever before, there are more cars on the road, and people are driving farther and more often. Activities such as shopping and playing tennis are no longer within walking distance of most communities. The result—an increased dependence on the automobile for traveling. And an increase in driving means more air pollution and congestion." This increased automobile use leads to another item we lose as we sprawl—time.

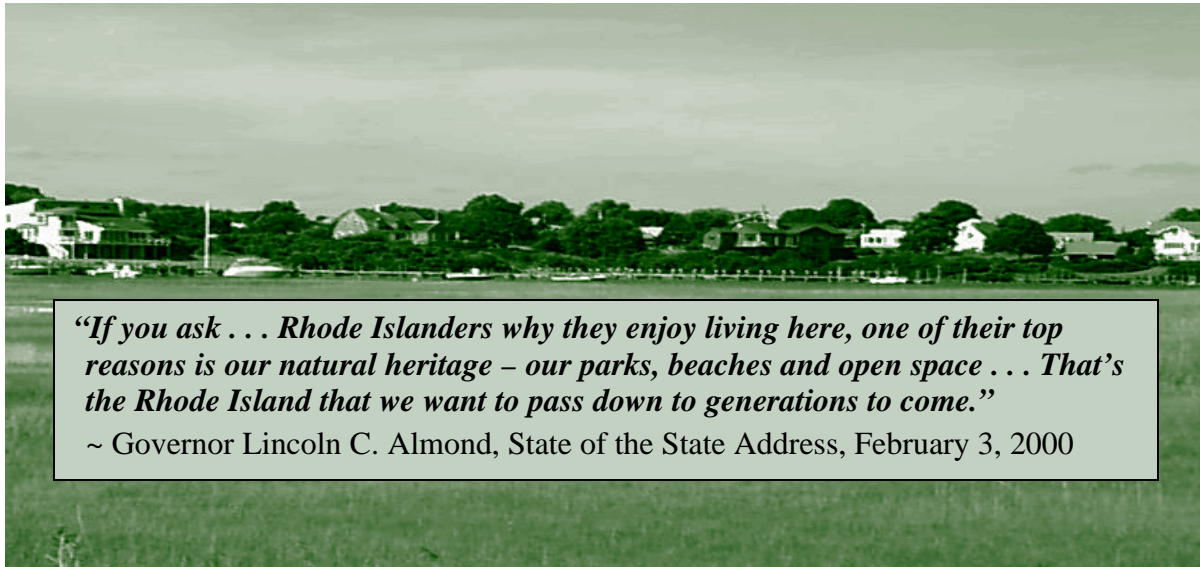
DID YOU KNOW?

Some Facts About Narragansett Bay and its Watershed

- ◆ Home to some 200 bird species, 60 species of fish and shellfish and 2 million people in 100 cities and towns in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.
- ◆ Comprises 646 square miles of watershed in Rhode Island (39% of the total).
- ◆ Contributes \$400 million from tourism, which supports 15,000 jobs.
- ◆ Produces \$25 million each year, the annual value of commercial catch of fish and shellfish from the Bay.



Planning for the Year 2020



Rhode Island’s land use patterns have changed as the societies that created them have changed. As the number of people living in the state, where they choose to reside, the prevailing technology, and the economic base have evolved, so have the patterns of land use.

Overall, we can characterize the trend for the past 50 years as one of urban decline and suburban expansion. People are living and working farther from urban centers and consuming undeveloped land. Urban job centers have decentralized to the suburbs, and new housing tracts have moved even deeper into agricultural and formerly forested areas.

Although the desire for a more pleasant lifestyle is understandable, property tax dollars collected from residential development are not sufficient to cover the cost of municipal services, primarily education.

How can we preserve and enhance the things we value in Rhode Island life without creating such unintended side effects as:

- ◆ Increased infrastructure costs—new schools, new roads, new sewers?
- ◆ Strains on municipal services?
- ◆ Increased travel as residences, jobs, retail centers, and recreational opportunities spread farther from each other?
- ◆ Increased air and water pollution?
- ◆ Ecological damage to ecosystems such as fields and forests that have been fragmented by subdivisions?
- ◆ Increased congestion as a community transforms from rural to urban?
- ◆ A decline in the urban tax base, which leads to higher taxes, which in turn, leads to more urban flight?

Planning for the Year 2020

“Paying attention to our own experiences as we move through our communities each day is a first step in understanding how we react to our surroundings. This understanding can help us change our communities in ways that work for all of us.”

~Tony Hiss

The Experience of Place: A New Way of Looking at and Dealing with Our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside, quoted in Smart Talk for Growing Communities, Congressional Exchange.

Developing Your Vision

You have been thinking about how we use our land and the impacts our land use decisions have on our quality of life.

Our land, water, and historic areas are limited resources. It's all about choices, priorities, and values. We value a home with a water view and we also value being able to walk along a pristine shore. How do we choose? How do our choices affect our quality of life—the things we value in our landscape? What choices would you make if you were planning the future of your community or the state?

⇒ What are the three things you like best about your neighborhood/community/state?

⇒ Is your community improving? Why or why not?

Name five things that would improve your community by 2020.

⇒ As you think about how the state has developed in recent years, in what ways has the quality of life improved and in what ways has it diminished?

Name five things that would make the state a better place to live by 2020.

⇒ Will future growth in your community improve or diminish your quality of life? Does the answer depend on *how* the growth is managed?

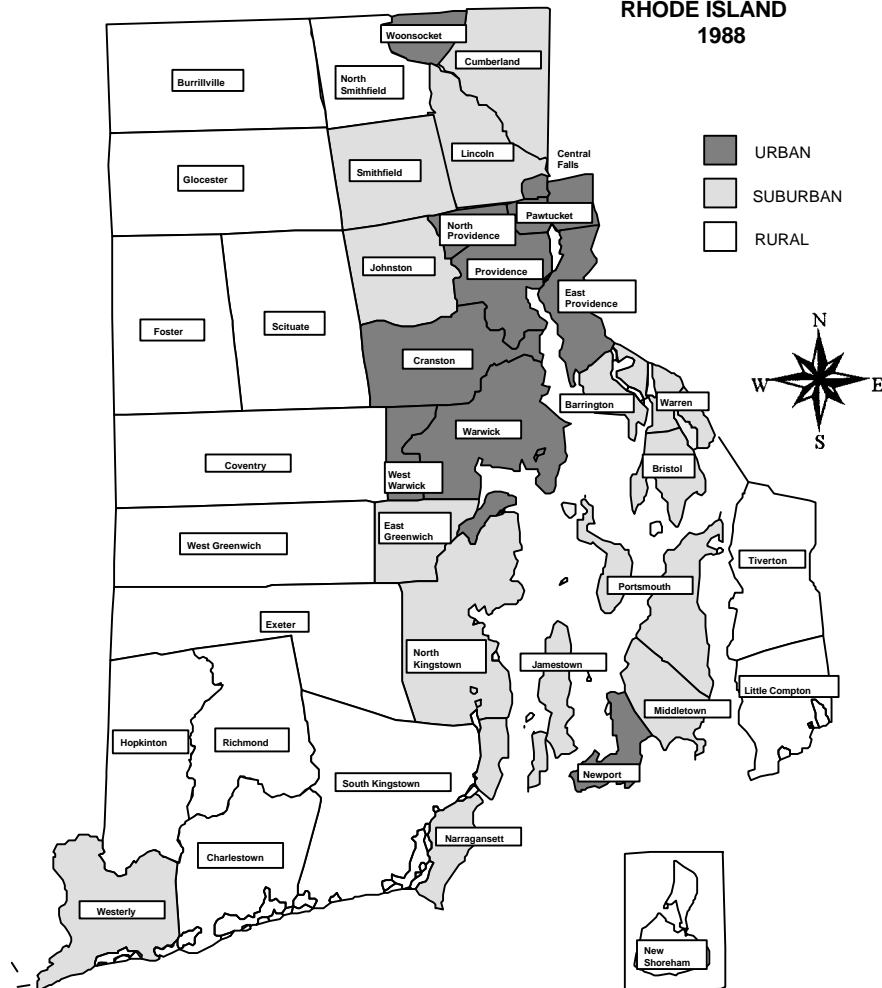
Speak Out!

If you would like to share your responses, please let us hear from you. We welcome your participation. You may reach us at:

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or log on through the State Planning Program's Web site:
www.planning.state.ri.us

URBAN, SUBURBAN AND RURAL COMMUNITIES IN RHODE ISLAND 1988



URBAN: 2500 or more persons per square mile and 50% or more of the land area classified as developed

SUBURBAN: 500 to 2499 persons per square mile and 25% or more of the land area classified as developed

RURAL: Less than 500 persons per square mile or a developed land area of less than 25%

Source : RI Statewide Planning Program

Statewide Planning Program's Mission

The Statewide Planning Program is charged with preparing and maintaining plans for the physical, economic, and social development of the state; encouraging their implementation; and coordinating the actions of state, local, federal, and private agencies and individuals within the framework of the state's development goals and policies. The basic charge is established by Sections 42-11-10 and 12 of the Rhode Island General Laws.

The Statewide Planning Program is part of the RI Department of Administration,
Robert L. Carl, Jr., Ph.D., Director